

The Brethren

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(Continued from Last Week)

When he had heard this report, getting his calm, Sinan arose from his cushion and stepped forward two paces. There he halted, with fury in his glittering eyes, looking like a man who had been in a black bell. For a moment he stroked his beard, and the brethren

and that on the first finger of his hand was a ring so like to that which hung about the neck of Godwin that none could have told them apart. "Man," Sinan said in a low voice, "what have you done? You have left Emir Hassan go, who is the most trusted friend and general of the sultan of Damascus. By now he is there near it, and within six days we shall see the army of Salah-ed-din riding the plain. What have you to say?"

"I answered the tall fedai, and his hand trembled as he spoke, "most worthy lord, I had no orders as to the going of the crew from your lips, and Frank Lozelle told me that he had been with you that they should be freed."

"Then, slave, he lied. He agreed with me through that dead spy that they should be slain, and do you not know that I give no orders in such a case as death, not life? But what of Prince Hassan?"

"I have nothing to say. I think must have bribed the spy named Masouda,"—and he pointed to the man—"to cut his bonds and afterwards killed the man for vengeance," for by the body we found a heavy weight of gold."

"Let the soldiers be brought," said Sinan, "and tell their story."

They were brought and stood by the captain, but they had no story to tell.

They swore that they had not seen guard nor heard a sound, yet in the morning came the prince was slain. Again the lord of death stroked his black beard. Then he held up his hand before the eyes of the three men, saying:

"You see the token. Go." "I have served you well for many years," said the fedai, "your service is ended. Go!" was the answer.

The fedai bowed his head in salute, and for a moment as though lost in thought, then, turning suddenly, walked to the edge of the abyss and leaped.

With a steady step to the edge of the abyss and leaped. For an instant the light shone on his white and fluttering robe, then from the depths of that some place floated up the sound of a fall, and all was still.

"Follow your captain to paradise," Sinan to the two soldiers. So the first went, the first with a steady and the second, who was not so sure, reeling over the edge of the precipice one might who is drunken.

"It is finished," said the dais, clapping their hands gently. "Dread lord, thank thee for thy justice."

Rosamund turned sick and faint, and the brethren paled. This man was terrible indeed—if he were a man not a devil—and they were in his power. How long would it be, they wondered, before they also were bidden to walk that gulf? Only Wulf swore in his heart that if he went by this road he should go with him.

On the corpse of the false palmer borne away to be thrown to the sea which always hovered over that land of death, and Sinan, having released himself upon the cushion, began to talk again through his "mouth," Masouda, in a low, quiet voice.

"I said to Rosamund, 'your life is known to me. Salah-ed-din is your nor is it wonderful'—here

his eyes glittered with a new and horrible light—"that he should desire to see such loveliness at his court, although the Frank Lozelle swore through yonder dead spy that you are precious in his eyes because of some vision that has come to him. Well, this heretic sultan is my enemy whom Satan protects, for even my fedais have failed to kill him, and perhaps there will be war on account of you. But, since this castle is impregnable, here you may dwell at peace, nor shall any desire be denied you. Speak, and your wishes are fulfilled."

"I desire," said Rosamund in a low, steady voice, "protection against Sir Hugh Lozelle and all men."

"It is yours. The lord of the mountain covers you with his own mantle."

"I desire," she went on, "that my brothers here may lodge with me, that I may not feel alone among strange people."

He thought awhile and answered:

"Your brethren shall lodge near you in the guest castle. Why not, since from them you cannot need protection? They shall meet you at the feast and in the garden. But she whom they wished to rescue from Salah-ed-din these tall brethren of yours might wish to rescue from Al-je-bal. Understand, then, all of you, that from the lord of death there is but one escape. Yonder runs its path." And he pointed to the dizzy place whence his three servants had leaped to their doom.

"Knights," he went on, addressing Godwin and Wulf, "lead your sister hence. This evening I bid her and you to my banquet. Till then farewell, Woman," he added to Masouda, "accompany them. You know your duties. This lady is in your charge. Suffer that no strange man comes near her, above all the Frank Lozelle. Dais, take notice and let it be proclaimed: To these three is given the protection of the signet in all things save that they must not leave my walls except under sanction of the signet—nay, in its very presence."

The dais rose, bowed and seated themselves again. Then, guided by Masouda and preceded and followed by guards, the brethren and Rosamund walked down the terrace through the curtains into the chancel-like place where men crouched upon the ground, through the great hall where more men crouched upon the ground, through the antechamber where at a word from Masouda the guards saluted, through passages to that place where they had slept. Here Masouda halted and said:

"Lady Rose of the World, who are fitly so named, I go to prepare your chamber. Doubtless you will wish to speak awhile with these your—brothers. Speak on and fear not, for it shall be my care that you are left alone, if only for a little while. Yet walls have ears, so I counsel you use that English tongue which none of us understand."

Then she bowed and went.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE brethren and Rosamund looked at each other; then, moving to the center of the chamber, where they thought that none would hear them, they began to speak in low voices and in English.

"Tell you your tale first, Rosamund," said Godwin.

She told it as she could.

Then Godwin spoke and told her theirs. Rosamund heard it and asked a question almost in a whisper:

"Why does that beautiful dark eyed woman befriend you?"

"I do not know," answered Godwin, "unless it is because of the accident of my having saved her from the lion."

Rosamund looked at him and smiled a little, and Wulf smiled also. Then she said:

"Blessings be on that lion and all its tribe! I pray that she may not soon forget the deed, for it seems that our lives hang upon her favor. Oh, that we could escape this place!"

"An eel in an osier trap has more chance of freedom," said Wulf gloomily. "Let us at least be thankful that we are caged together—for how long, I wonder?"

As he spoke Masouda appeared, attended by waiting women, and, bowing to Rosamund, said:

"It is the will of the master, lady, that I lead you to the chambers that have been made ready for you, there to rest until the hour of the feast. Fear not; you shall meet your brethren then. You knights have leave, if it so pleases you, to exercise your horses in the gardens."

"She means that we must go," muttered Godwin, adding aloud, "Farewell, sister, until tonight."

So they parted, unwillingly enough. In the courtyard they found their horses, also a mounted escort of four fierce looking fedais and an officer. When they were in the saddle this man, motioning to them to follow him, passed by an archway out of the courtyard into the gardens. Hence ran a broad road strewn with sand, along which they began to gallop. This road followed the gulf which encircled the citadel and inner town of Masyaf. On they went, the gulf always on their right hand. Thrice they passed round the city thus, the last time by themselves, for the captain and the fedais were far outstripped. Indeed, it was

not until they had unsaddled Flame and Smoke in their stalls that these appeared, spurring their foaming horses. Taking no heed of them, the brethren thrust aside the grooms, dressed their steeds down, fed and watered them. About the hour of sunset the women servants came and led them to the bath, where the black slaves washed and perfumed them, clothing them in fresh robes above their armor.

When they came out the sun was down, and the women, bearing torches in their hands, conducted them to a great and gorgeous hall, which they had not seen before, built of fretted stone and having a carved and painted roof. On the floor of this hall, each seated upon his cushion beside low tables inlaid with pearl, sat the guests, a hundred or more, all dressed in white robes on which the red dagger was blazoned, and all as silent as though they were asleep.

When the brethren reached the place the women left them, and servants with gold chains round their necks escorted them to a dais in the middle of the hall, where were many cushions, as yet unoccupied, arranged in a semicircle, of which the center was a divan higher and more gorgeous than the rest.

Here places were pointed out to them opposite the divan, and they took their stand by them. They had not long to wait, for presently there was a sound of music and, heralded by troops of singing women, the lord Sinan, clad now in his blood red festal robe, approached.

Around him marched four slaves, black as ebony, each of whom held a flaming torch on high, while behind followed the two gigantic guards who had stood sentry over him when he sat under the canopy of justice. As he advanced down the hall every man in it rose and prostrated himself and so remained until his lord was seated, save only the two brethren. Settling himself among the cushions at one end of the divan, he waved his hand, whereon the feasters, and with them Godwin and Wulf, sat themselves down.

Now there was a pause, while Sinan glanced along the hall impatiently. Soon the brethren saw why, since at the end opposite to that by which he had entered appeared more singing women, and after them, also escorted by four black torchbearers—only these were women—walked Rosamund and behind her Masouda.

Rosamund it was without doubt, but Rosamund transformed, for now she seemed an eastern queen. Round her head was a coronet of gems from which hung a veil, but not so as to hide her face. Jeweled, too, were her heavy plaits of hair; jeweled the rose silk garments that she wore, the girdle at her waist, her naked, ivory arms and even the slippers on her feet.

On came Rosamund, and now, behold, the lord Al-je-bal rose and, giving her his hand, seated her by him on the divan.

"Show no surprise, Wulf," muttered Godwin, who had caught a warning look in the eyes of Masouda as she took up her position behind Rosamund.

Now the feast began. Slaves, running to and fro, set dish after dish filled with strange and savory meats upon the little inlaid tables, those that were served to Sinan and his guests fashioned all of them of silver or of gold.

Godwin and Wulf ate, though not for hunger's sake, but of what they ate they remembered nothing who were watching Sinan and straining their ears to catch all he said without seeming to take note or listen. Although she strove to hide it and to appear indifferent, it was plain to them that Rosamund was much afraid. Again and again Sinan presented to her choice morsels of food. All the while also he devoured her with his fierce eyes.

Wine, perfumed and spiced, was brought in golden cups, of which, having drunk, he offered to Rosamund. But she shook her head and asked Masouda for water, saying that she touched nothing stronger, and it was given her cooled with snow. The brethren asked for water also, whereupon Sinan looked at them suspiciously and demanded the reason. Godwin replied through Masouda that they were under an oath to touch no wine till they returned to their own country, having fulfilled their mission.

Now the wine that he had drunk took hold of Sinan, and he began to talk, who, without it, was so silent.

He rose and cried with a loud voice:

"Servants of Al-je-bal, pledge, I command you, this flower of flowers, the highborn Princess of Baalbec, the niece of the sultan, Salah-ed-din, whom men call the Great," and he sneered, "though he be not so great as I, this queen of maids who soon"—Then, checking himself, he drank off his wine and with a low bow presented the empty jeweled cup to Rosamund.

"Queen! Queen!" shouted all the company. "Queen of our master and of us all!"

Sinan heard and smiled. Then, motioning for silence, he took the hand of Rosamund, kissed it, and, turning, passed from the hall preceded by his singing women and surrounded by the dais and guards.

Godwin and Wulf stepped forward to speak with Rosamund, but Masouda interposed herself between them, say-

ing in a cold, clear voice:

"It is not permitted. Go, knights, and cool your brows in yonder garden, where sweet water runs. Your sister is my charge. Fear not, for she is guarded."

"Come," said Godwin to Wulf, "we had best obey."

So together they walked through the crowd of those feasters that remained, for most of them had already left the hall, who made way, not without reverence, for the brethren of this new star of beauty, on to the terrace and from the terrace into the gardens. Under many of the trees and in tents set about here and there rugs were spread, and to them came men who had drunk of the wine of the feast and cast themselves down to sleep.

"Are they drunk?" asked Wulf.

"It would seem so," answered Godwin.

Yet these men appeared to be mad rather than drunk, for they walked



"Pledge, I command you, this flower of flowers."

steadily enough, but with wide set, dreamy eyes, nor did they seem to sleep upon the rugs, but lay there staring at the sky and muttering with their lips, their faces steeped in a strange, unholy rapture. Sometimes they would rise and walk a few paces with outstretched arms till the arms closed as though they clasped something invisible, to which they bent their heads to babble awhile. Then they walked back to their rugs again, where they remained silent.

"Step out, brother," said Wulf, "for at the very sight of those rugs I grow sleepy."

So they walked on toward the sound of a waterfall, and, when they came to it, drank and bathed their faces and heads.

"This is better than their wine," said Wulf. They reached an open sward where there were no rugs and no sleepers. "Now," said Wulf, halting, "tell me what does all this mean?"

"Are you deaf and blind?" asked Godwin. "Cannot you see that yonder fiend is in love with Rosamund and means to take her, as he well may do?"

Wulf groaned aloud, then answered: "I swear that first I will kill him, even though we must keep him company."

"Among those ornaments that hung about the waist of Rosamund I saw a jeweled knife," answered Godwin sadly. "She can be trusted to use it if need be, and after that we can be trusted to do our worst."

As they spoke they had loitered toward the edge of the glade and, halting there, stood silent till presently from under the shadow of a cedar tree appeared a solitary white robed woman. It was Masouda.

"Follow me, brothers Peter and John," she said in a laughing whisper. "I have words to say to you." And she flitted ahead of them.

Silently as a wraith she went, now appearing in the open spaces, now vanishing beneath the dense gloom of cedar boughs, till she reached a naked, lonely rock which stood almost upon the edge of the gulf. Opposite to this rock was a great mound, such as ancient peoples reared over the bodies of their dead, and in the mound, cunningly hidden by growing shrubs, a massive door. Masouda took a key from her girdle and, having looked around to see that they were alone, unlocked it.

"Enter," she said, pushing them before her.

They obeyed and through the darkness within heard her close the door.

"Now we are safe awhile," she said, with a sigh, "or at least so I think. But I will lead you to where there is more light."

Then, taking each of them by the hand, she went forward along a smooth incline till presently they saw the moonlight and by it discovered that they stood at the mouth of a cave which was fringed with bushes. Running up from the depths of the gulf below to this opening was a ridge or shoulder of rock, very steep and narrow.

"See the only road that leads from the citadel of Masyaf save that across the bridge," said Masouda.

"A bad one," answered Wulf, staring downward.

"Aye, yet horses trained to rocks can follow it. At its foot is the bottom of the gulf and a mile or more away to the left a deep cleft which leads to the top of the mountain and to freedom. Will you not take it now? By tomorrow's dawn you might be far away."

"And where would the Lady Rosamund be?" asked Wulf.

"In the harem of the lord Sinan—that is, very soon," she answered coolly. "Oh, say it not!" he exclaimed, clapping her arm, while Godwin leaned back against the wall of the cave.

"Why should I hide the truth? Have you no eyes to see that he is enamored of her loveliness, like others? Listen! A while ago my master, Sinan, chanced to lose his queen—how, we need not ask, but it is said that she wearied him. Now, as he must by law, he mourns for her a month, from full moon to full moon. But on the day after the full moon—that is, the third morning from now—he may wed again, and I think there will be a marriage. Till then, however, your sister is safe."

"Therefore," said Godwin, "within that time she must either escape or die."

"There is a third way," answered Masouda, shrugging her shoulders. "She might stay and become the wife of Sinan."

Wulf muttered something between his teeth, then stepped toward her threateningly, saying:

"Rescue her or—"

"Stand back, Pilgrim John," she said, with a laugh. "If I rescue her—which indeed would be hard—it will not be for fear of your great sword."

"What, then, will avail, Masouda?" asked Godwin in a sad voice. "To promise you money would be useless even if we could."

"I am glad that you spared me that insult," she replied, with flashing eyes, "for then there had been an end. Now, hear me and forget no word. At present you are in favor with Sinan, who believes you to be the brothers of the lady Rosamund, not her lovers, but from the moment he hears the truth your doom is sealed. Now, what the Frank Lozelle knows, that the Al-je-bal may know at any time—and will know if these should meet."

"Meanwhile you are free, so tomorrow while you ride about the garden, as you will do, take note of the tall rock that stands without and how to reach it from any point, even in the dark. Tomorrow also, when the moon is up, they will lead you to the narrow bridge to ride your horses to and fro there that they may learn not to fear it in the light. When you have stabled them go into the gardens and come hither unobserved, as the place being so far away you can do. The guards will let you pass, thinking only that you desire to drink a cup of wine with some fair friend, as is the custom of our guests. Enter this cave—here is the key—and she handed it to Wulf—"and if I be not there await me. Then I will tell you my plan, if I have any, but until then I must scheme and think. Now it grows late—go."

"And you, Masouda," said Godwin doubtfully. "How will you escape this place?"

"By a road you do not know of, for I am mistress of the secrets of this city. Still, I thank you for your thought of me. Go, I say, and lock the door behind you."

Next morning when the brothers had breakfasted they loitered awhile, hoping to win speech with Rosamund or sight of her or at the least that Masouda would come to them, but they saw no Rosamund, and no Masouda came. At length an officer appeared and beckoned to them to follow him. So they followed and were led through the halls and passages to the terrace of justice, where Sinan, clad in his black robe, sat as before beneath a canopy in the midst of the sunlit marble floor. There, too, beside him, also beneath the canopy and gorgeously appareled, sat Rosamund. Wulf said in a loud voice in English:

"Tell us, Rosamund, is it well with you?" Lifting her pale face, she smiled and nodded.

(To be Continued)

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